

THE
REPRINT



ELSAH HISTORY

Number Two

First Quarter, 1972

Elsah's Doll Museum

When Brock and Onetto, Elsah's first commission merchants, acquired the stone cottage on lower La-Salle Street in the mid 1850's, they surely had no idea that one day it would house the largest doll collection in the Midwest. But this is in fact the case.

For over ten years now, Mrs. Maude A. Trovillion has been adding to her collection in the "Little Stone House" until now people come from all over to see it. In fact her guest register includes names from all fifty states and several foreign countries. Here is the one place in Elsah where the study of history is an everyday occupation.

A recent television news special on the museum by St. Louis channel 4 newsmen Jack Etzel, and in addition coverage in eight major newspapers, has given the museum publicity that has made it increasingly a drawing card.

Visitors to the museum are not disappointed. The Trovillion collection includes dolls from a number of nations; American regional dolls (including apple-heads and some with hickory nut heads); historical dolls (such as one with the head of Mary Todd Lincoln); and such rarities as a 17th century Swedish doll with its original flax hair, a valuable French Bru, and Bylo and Kewpie dolls. Especially prominent is a large collection of German dolls.

Nor are all the dolls old. Maude Trovillion tries to keep up with the latest doll trends in order to delight the many children who visit the museum. Typical of her generosity, Mrs. Trovillion allows children under twelve to come to the museum free. As a result she entertains brownie troops very regularly. She feels this is a contribution she can make, and that if children become used to intimate and familiar museums when they are young, museum-going will become a natural part of their life.



Visitors to the museum find dolls in every available shelf and case, a great profusion of small human eyes staring out at them--in fact almost 8,000 pairs. They find also that the dolls are complemented by a collection of antique toys and a nineteenth century kitchen containing many of the everyday tools of the housewife of a century ago--even a small, wooden mousetrap. China dogs and other antiques, and furniture, especially that of the cottage livingroom, complete the contents of the museum.

Mrs. Trovillion says that she never played with dolls as a child. But now her interest in them is consuming. "Dolls are history," she says. Often she gets up at 5 a. m. to make the small clothespin dolls she sells very inexpensively in the museum. Her home, a red house next to the museum, is full of dolls in various states of repair or costuming, all eventually destined to join the population of the museum. Plainly she does not conduct her museum as a commercial venture. It is a labor of fascination and love, and a rich contribution to those who visit it.

ELSAH HISTORY, published quarterly in Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter issues by Historic Elsah Foundation, Paul O. Williams, editor. Subscription is with membership. Send to P. O. Box 117, Elsah, Illinois 62028. Rates: individual, \$2; family, \$3; sustaining, \$10 or more. Sample copies available on request.

An Elsay Tom Sawyer

In country towns, traditionally boys have had to amuse themselves. This they have always done magnificently, though occasionally to the discomfiture of themselves or their elders. The word boy, one may not need to add, came from a root meaning rogue.

The situation was no exception in Elsay, which, after all, is not so far from Hannibal, Missouri, the town that withstood the depredations of young Samuel Clemens and his literary creations. People in Elsay still remember when the arrival of a train was enough of an even to get many townspeople to come to the station to see who got on and off. But boys always manage to stave off such boredom.

One man who told us a short chapter from his Elsay boyhood was Samuel Albrecht, or Ernest, as his friends knew him, to distinguish him from his father, who was the Methodist Minister in Elsay from 1903 until 1907, and who had the same name.

Mr. Albrecht went on to many years of youth work for the YMCA in St. Louis and Alton before his retirement. Now he lives in the Eunice C. Smith Nursing Home on College Avenue in Alton. He was interviewed there by Mrs. Judy Ward, a member of Historic Elsay Foundation. An excerpt of that interview follows:

Now as a boy growing up in Elsay, I had a lot of experiences that I thought were somewhat unusual and possibly laughable to those who would hear about it. One of them was that we managed to swipe (imagine a preacher's son swiping) some chickens, and some eggs, and some other eatables, and we went out down the railroad tracks and climbed to a cave near the lookout which was at Mrs. Ames's residence (now occupied by our good friends of Principia College).¹ The cave was something that we wanted to explore mainly because it was there. That was about the only reason we could give, and we climbed up. I had been elected to go first. Some honor. My brother, Ralph, who recently passed away, followed me. And then, behind him, was Marion Allen, and behind him Wilbur Seagraves. Wilbur used to work as a gatekeeper at Principia College and was a very fine lad.

All right, I got in quite ways. You possibly will recognize the fact that it was a little early for flashlights. We had candles, and we were crawling on our stomachs, and we had nothing on except overalls, the old-fashioned overalls, with a bib and a shirt, no underwear, and no socks. We were barefooted.

All right, we got in quite ways, and I came to a place where I could feel no bottom. In other words, a step-off. So I picked up a piece of rock and dropped it into the hole and it was quite a distance down to where we heard the rock splash, when it hit the water.

But immediately after I had thrown the rock down there, there were two balls of fire about two inches apart that moved around, dead ahead, to the left on a ledge, and I naturally was interested in seeing what it was. And I hollered back to my brother and the friends, "Hold everything! There's somebody in here beside us, or there's something in here beside us!"

They said, "Oh, that isn't possible."

I said, "Well can't you see those eyes?"

Well, my body seemed to fill up the entrance, and they couldn't see. All of a sudden there was a blinding flash of something or other that hit me square in the face. I found out very quickly that it was a skunk. And he was defending himself by the only method he had. And so I kicked the face off my brother getting out of there, and pulled my shirt tail out and scratched my stomach pretty badly.

All right, we went down to the river, crossed the railroad tracks and down to the water, and I found a muddy spot. I had heard that a good way to get rid of that stench was to bathe in mud. I tried that, and I also went swimming. And we buried all of my clothing in the mud, and then we high-tailed it for home. We forgot our meals, our chicken and everything else, and headed for home. And then it suddenly dawned on us that we couldn't go home, or at least I couldn't, without any clothes on. I was in my birthday duds.

Well, to make a long story short, we walked around Plumb Street, the main street of Elsay,² which we called Plumb Street because it goes Plumb through. Clear 'round, past the Besterfeldt's home at the beginning of the valley there, and then over on the other side and back again, to my residence, my home.³ And I had to take a bath in a tub because we had no bathtubs and no showers, and your weekly bath was in a great big tub. Mother would heat water on the stove in a boiler to see to it that you had plenty of warm water. And so I had to have a bath right away. And Dad said he thought possibly that the experience that I had was enough to teach me a lesson so this time he wouldn't use the usual punishment for bad boys.

¹ Mrs. Lucy V. Semple Ames, daughter of General James Semple, founder of Elsay, and widow of Edgar Ames, a St. Louis meatpacker, maintained a sumptuous summer home, Notchcliff, on the bluffs just east of Elsay. This home burned in 1911. The notch in the bluffs after which it was named is the first one downriver from Elsay. Mr. Albrecht has noted that the cave was a small hole in the high part of the bluff near there. The entrance is apparently now covered over.

² Mill Street.

³ The Albrechts lived, of course, in the Methodist parsonage, now the home of Mrs. Zelma Hake, at the entrance to Valley Street.



SAM ALBRECHT TODAY

House Tour

Historic Elsah Foundation is planning its biggest house tour yet for the afternoon of Mother's Day, the 14th of May, from 12:30 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. Seven houses, currently, will be opened, including some that have never been shown to the public.

In addition there will be a bake sale and craft sale in the Village Civic Center, and a historic information center and art sale will be operated in the Village Hall. The purpose of the tour is two-fold: first, to invite the public to an interesting and informative tour of our historic village; and second, to raise money for the refurbishing of the Village Hall. HEF hopes to see everyone there. Tell your friends to come. A donation of \$2 is requested. However, sustaining members are invited free.

News Notes

Progress Toward an Elsah Museum

Progress is being made toward establishing a museum of documents, photographs, and artifacts

pertaining to the history of Elsah and its environs. This museum will be housed in the upper room of the Civic Center. Anyone with items of interest may contribute them to the museum by contacting either Robert Connell or Mrs. Pat Farmer.

Cure for Smallpox

William McNair, Elsah's diarist, entered the following cure for smallpox in his diary on the 31st of August, 1882: "sulphate of Zinc 1 grain fox glove (Digitalis) 1 grain 1/2 Teaspoon full of sugar Thoroughly mixed with two Tablespoonfull of water then add 4 oz of water Dose a table spoonfull every hour half dose for children and the deasise will surly Disapear in 24 hours" This formula undoubtedly worked as well as other preparations of the time.

Illinois Historic Sites Survey

The Illinois Historic Sites Survey is currently investigating and recording sites within the state that have architectural, archaeological, and historic significance. The results of this investigation will be two-fold. First, important sites will be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, thus giving these sites protection from eradication or alteration. Second, a State Register of Historic Landmarks is being compiled for publication when the survey is completed.

The State Liaison Officer for Illinois is Mr. Henry N. Barkhausen, Department of Conservation, 102 State Office Building, 400 South Spring Street, Springfield, Illinois 62706. Local inquiries concerning the survey can be addressed to Paul Williams of HEF.

So far Jersey County has not begun a survey.

Progress Toward Publications

This spring our first leaflet will be published. It will be a reprint of the Principia Pilot of 19 November 1971, an issue devoted entirely to the work of the well-known architect, Bernard Maybeck in Elsah. This fourteen page study is, surprisingly enough, the most extensive treatment of the largest commission of this architect, most of whose work is in California. HEF has been granted permission to reprint the Pilot and to add a few changes to it designed to show the importance of Maybeck's work to the study of Elsah history.

Last fall our youngest active member, Gavin Campbell, began the job of recording the entire Elsah Cemetery. When school intervened, the work, which proved to be sizeable, was taken over by Tom Gutnick, who produced a complete listing, in alphabetical order, of all the existing stones in the cemetery, including location and chronological data. This information is currently being combined with a series of 19th century census and other listings to produce a document of interest to genealogists and others interested in citizen statistics. We hope that a small edition of this leaflet will be out this spring.

Course in Writing Local History

For the past two quarters Principia College has offered a research course in writing local history. This course has a symbiotic relation to HEF. Members help the student learn techniques of local history writing, while the student, through his efforts, aids the foundation in generating information, much of which will not wait until HEF researchers have the opportunity to develop it.

Notable accomplishments include the following: Leslie Yelland has worked on genealogical studies of several long-time Elsah families, using interviews and documents to produce a considerable mass of data. Her interviews are transcribed, and include much valuable historical information. Ann Wheeler has worked toward an essay on Elsah's most celebrated crime, the robbery of Xavier Schneider in 1887, and the subsequent trial in Jerseyville, in 1888, of three defendants. Gail Pierson has worked toward a compilation of the best articles of Elsah newspaper columnist and humorist, "Jeremiah." Tom Gutnick, as was mentioned above, did the cemetery study, along with an accompanying essay. Nancy Hormel has transcribed an entire volume of the McNair diaries and studied the contents of several volumes. We are anticipating an essay on the subject. Randy Hale is at work on a study of the bald eagles that winter in this area, and is using the numerous investigations that have been made of them in the past.

Indianapolis Conference

On March 16-18, Mrs. Inge Mack, of HEF, attended a Midwest Regional Workshop on the administration of historic agencies and museums, sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Discussed were such subjects as fund raising, publicity, membership programs, development of oral history programs, educational programs for the community, and interpretation of historic sites and buildings.

Tax Status

As of yet, Historic Elsah Foundation has not become an organization to which are tax deductible contributions. But we are making progress and hope to become such an organization soon.

Response to the First Newsletter

We are very heartened by the fact that about two hundred people have responded to the call for members that accompanied our first newsletter. Of these forty-four are sustaining members. New members continue to join. Please pass the word. Coming newsletters look very promising and should prove to be of wide interest.

Log House

In the last issue we promised further information in this issue about the Elsah Hills log house. This is still under investigation.



The course in writing local history took one field trip to the Jay Gould railroad tunnel, located in a ravine below the cemetery. As part of what was apparently a masterful ruse on the part of Gould to gain control of the Eads Bridge, over 200 feet of tunnel was built back into the limestone bedrock. Never completed, the tunnel has served as a cattle shelter and curiosity. Now the entrance is nearly filled with silt, and inside the mud and water comes to the knees (and over the boots of several). But the far end is dry. Here Randy Hale inspects the tunnel ceiling, with its half-inch stalactites.